

Robert Cottingham

Components



Dieu Donn  Lab Grant Program: Robert Cottingham

Robert Cottingham: *Components*

March 3 – April 24, 2004 at the Gallery at Dieu Donn  Papermill

Robert Cottingham: *New Still Lifes*

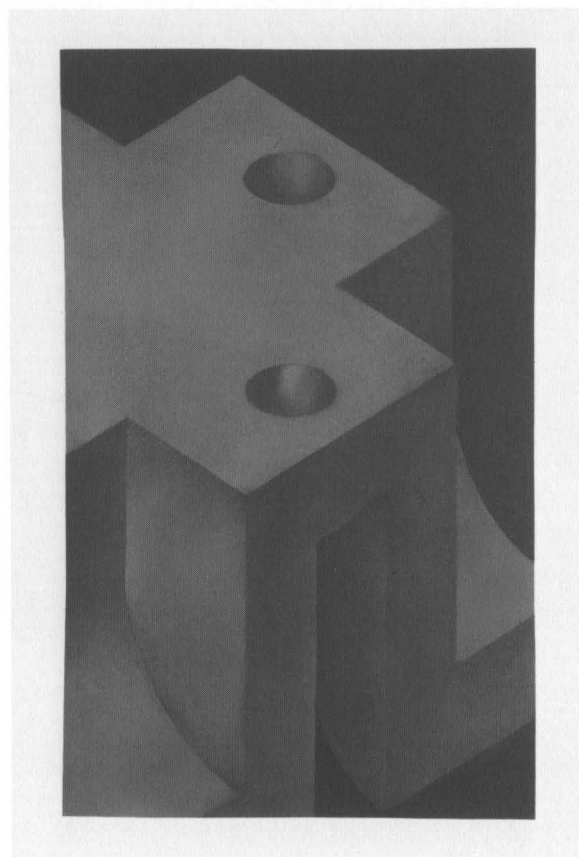
March 24 – April 24, 2004 at Forum Gallery, New York

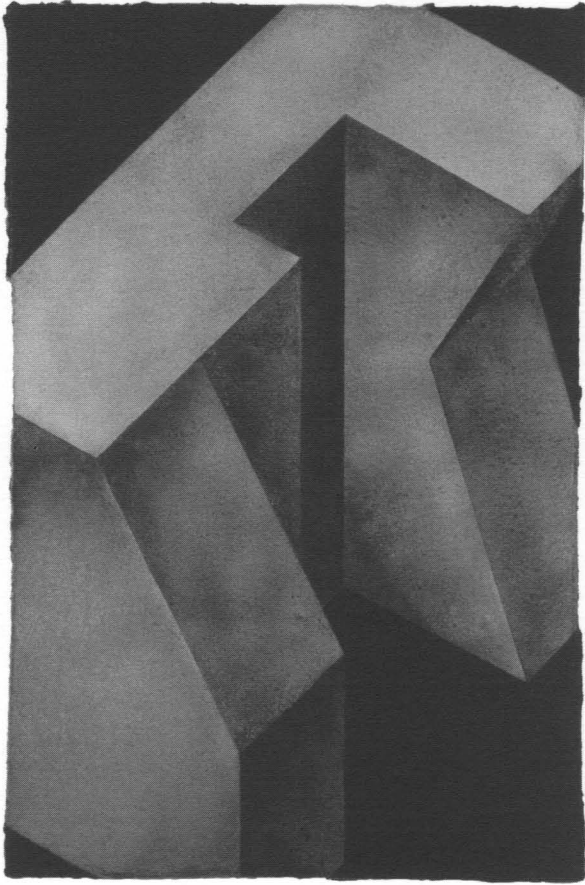
Robert Cottingham's *Components* BY ISABELLE DERVAUX

In 1994 while browsing at a local library sale, Robert Cottingham found a textbook on mechanical engineering in which small diagrams of machine parts drew his attention. He purchased the book for a quarter and took it with him later that year to the MacDowell Colony, where he had been offered a three-week residency. There he embarked on a series of drawings based on the diagrams. Indifferent to the actual function of the machine parts, he was captivated by their odd geometric shapes and produced about thirty drawings of them, adding light and volume to the original line drawings. He intended to develop these studies into a larger project, although he did not know yet specifically what that would be. The drawings had been hanging on Cottingham's studio wall for eight years when he received the invitation from Dieu Donn  to participate in the Lab Grant Program. Now was the opportunity, working in a new medium that would force new ways of thinking, to explore this series of images. He decided to turn them into paper pulp paintings.

The first step was to determine the composition and size of each image. For this, Cottingham relied on two devices that have been central to his art since he began painting in the 1960s: enlargement and cropping. He opted for the largest size sheet that Dieu Donn 's equipment could allow, 60 x 40 inches,

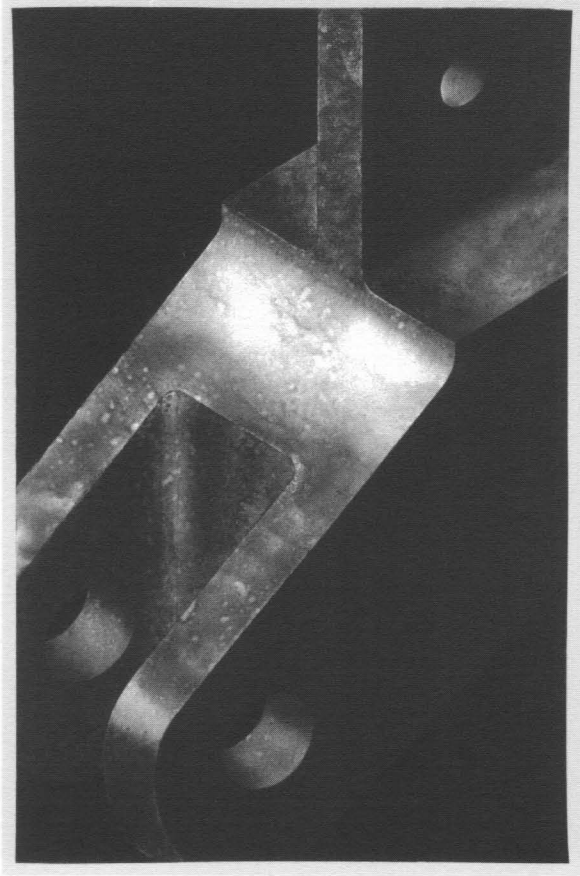
and enlarged the initial drawings, cropping the machine parts so they would fill the sheet in a tight close-up. He also played with the orientation of the





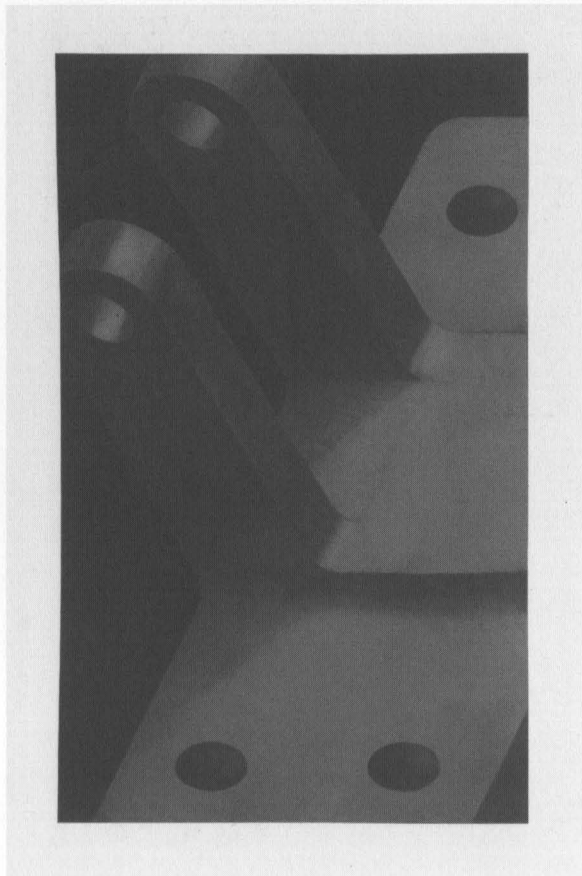
pieces, rotating some of them anywhere from thirty to ninety degrees. Each new drawing was copied onto a mylar sheet, which was cut into sections like a giant jigsaw puzzle delineating the main facets of the machine parts.

In the papermaking studio the mylar was placed over a wet sheet of newly-formed colored cotton pulp. In order to create the image, separate sections of the puzzle were lifted, one by one, exposing the base sheet underneath. Each area was painted with black or gray linen paper pulp and then covered again by replacing the cut mylar piece. The pulp was applied with various densities and blended with a fine nozzle spray to achieve gradating values and subtle surface patterns. The pulp that would spill over the mylar edges was sprayed away with water to create clean edges around the newly painted section. This process was repeated until the entire surface of the colored base sheet was painted. Each piece took several hours during which the artist worked closely with master

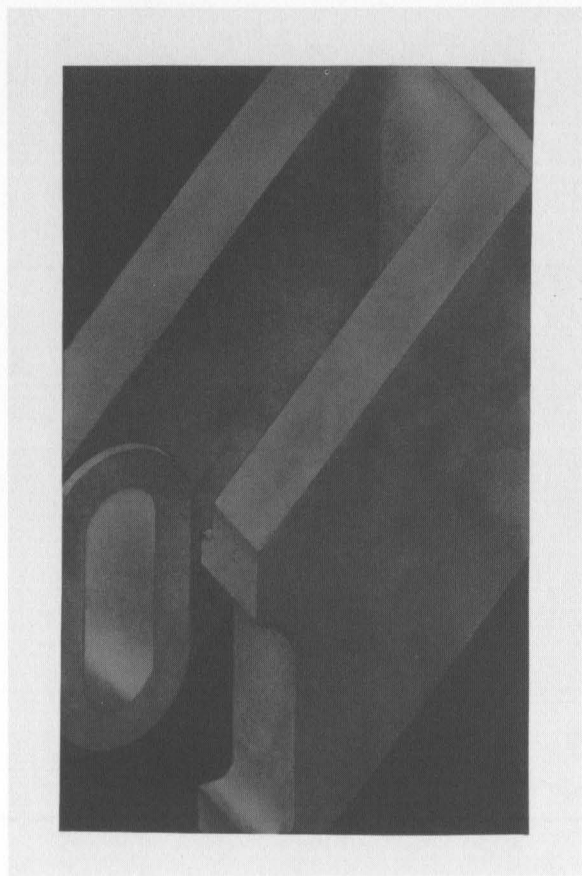


papermaker Paul Wong.

Precise edges and smooth, uniform surfaces have characterized Cottingham's work since the beginning of his career as a photorealist painter. Paper pulp, however, doesn't lend itself to such crispness. The contrast between the metallic surfaces of the machine parts and the organic nature of handmade paper presented a challenge. "Paper has its own personality," Cottingham said, "I couldn't control everything." At first, the feathery lines produced by the paper fibers were unappealing to him. In the end, the unpredictability of the result became one of the most exciting parts of the process and contributed to the ambiguity of the final images: were these objects made of metal? or stone? After the paper pulp paintings were dried, some of the images were trimmed and pasted on another sheet, leaving a white margin all around. In others, the rough deckled borders were preserved and the image left bleeding off the edges, giving the painting a more material presence.

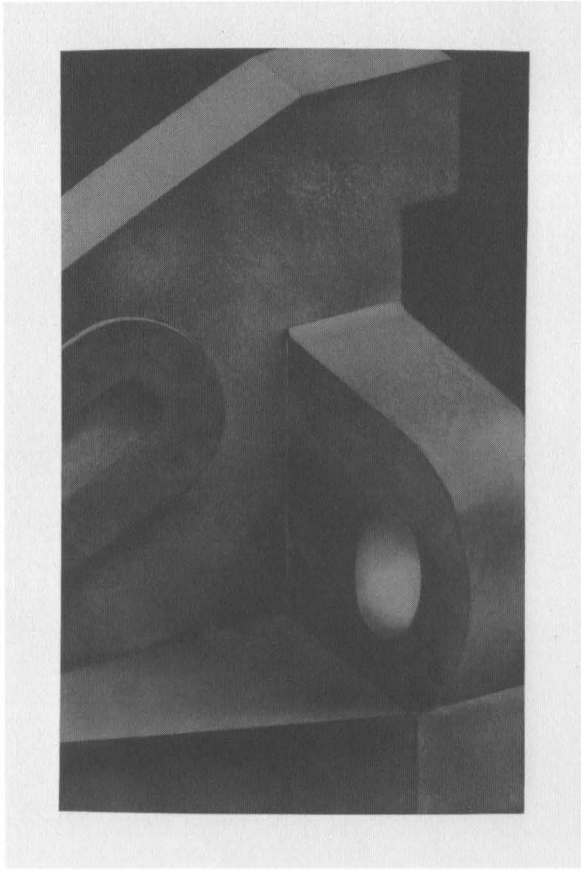


With or without the white border, each *Component* is a powerful image. As with Cottingham's recent paintings of huge cameras and typewriters, scale plays a major role in the works' dramatic impact. The actual machine parts may have been no larger than a few inches. Blown up to five feet, they become monumental architecture. In #1, #11, and #13 especially, the plain, massive structures evoke the colossal pylons of Egyptian architecture or the steps of a vast temple in some ancient civilization. Where the technological reference is more obvious, as in the plug shapes of #5 and #15, their gigantic size projects us into an industrial Gulliverian universe. Isolated and emerging as they do from dark recesses of shadow, Cottingham's machine components take on an enigmatic, almost foreboding appearance. As in the empty plazas of Giorgio de Chirico's paintings, with their ominous, long cast shadows, a disquieting atmosphere prevails. Although the diagonal perspective of most of the *Components* recalls the compositions of



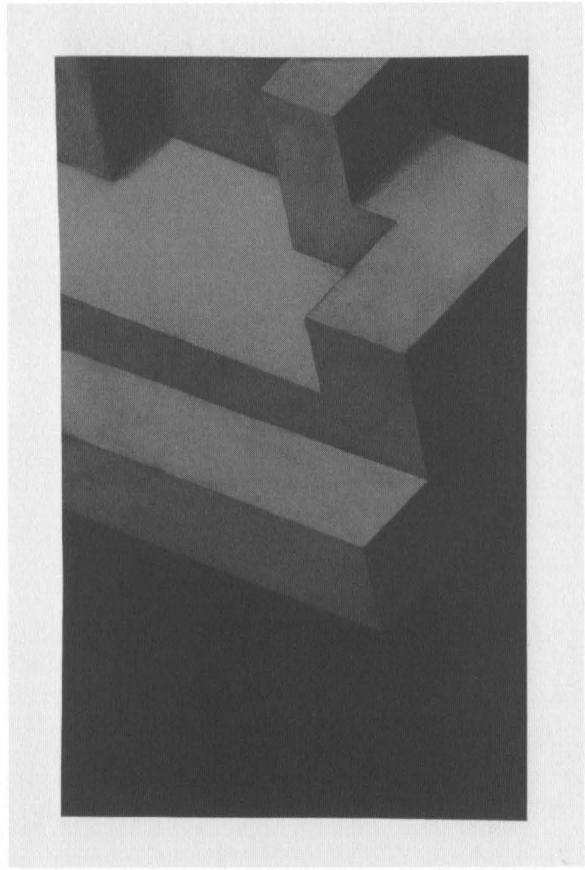
the sign paintings that made Cottingham famous in the 1970s, the bright sun that illuminated these outdoor scenes has given way to the dim light of a tenebrous, airless space. The ethereal pinks, yellows, and acid greens of some science-fiction palette add to the aura of mystery.

The stark effect of the *Components* also recalls Cottingham's *Rolling Stock* series of the early 1990s, inspired by old railroad boxcars. Both series convey a certain nostalgia for the heyday of heavy industry. The rough surface of the handmade paper even echoes the gritty texture of the earlier pictures, which the artist achieved by mixing sand into the ground of the paintings. But in the *Components*, based on much simpler industrial objects, the tighter cropping gives the images a higher degree of abstraction. In that sense, they are closer to the art of the machine age of the 1920s and 1930s when painters and photographers exalted the beauty of the industrial environment and developed a new aesthetic based on the machine as a



symbol of purity and precision. Paul Strand photographed close-up details of machinery. Fernand Léger, intrigued by the art of the engineer, exchanged some of his prints for American mechanical drawings. Cottingham has always acknowledged his admiration for Charles Sheeler, one of the main exponents of early modernism in America. In their evocation of ancient architecture, the *Components* relate to Sheeler's *Classic Landscape*, which compared the geometry and order of a Ford automobile plant to those of Greek architecture. They also call to mind Charles Demuth's *My Egypt*, in which grain elevators stand as the pyramids of the modern world.

Yet, Cottingham's *Components* could never be mistaken for a work from the 1920s. Their colossal scale, artificial light, and synthetic colors belong to a post-modern world. Made of paper, these monumental symbols of heavy industry show their fragility in the visible natural fibers that compose them. It is ironic that for his first experiment with such an organic



medium as pulp painting Cottingham has chosen a subject as far removed from nature as possible. It is, however, in keeping with his tendency to avoid all natural elements in his art. (Rarely do his outdoor paintings include even an inch of blue sky.) The adventure of working with a new material is what attracted him to paper pulp. Each new technique Cottingham has explored, notably in his printmaking experiments, has opened him to new concepts and strategies, which he then applies to other works. At Dieu Donn e, while investigating the possibilities that both a new subject and a new medium offered to his imagination, Cottingham has uncovered all the drama that can lurk behind little pieces of machinery.

Isabelle Dervaux is Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the National Academy of Design. She holds a Ph.D. in art history from New York University's Institute of Fine Arts and has published widely on twentieth-century American art.

LIST OF WORKS PRODUCED

All works 60 x 40 inches, 2003, unless otherwise noted.

Component #1, linen pulp painting mounted on cotton base sheet

Component #4, linen pulp painting on cotton base sheet

Component #5, linen pulp painting on cotton base sheet

Component #6, linen pulp painting on cotton base sheet

Component #8, linen pulp painting mounted on cotton base sheet

Component #9, linen pulp painting mounted on cotton base sheet, 40 x 40 inches

Component #11, linen pulp painting on cotton base sheet

Component #13, linen pulp painting mounted on cotton base sheet

Component #14, linen pulp painting mounted on cotton base sheet

Component #15, linen pulp painting mounted on cotton base sheet

ROBERT COTTINGHAM [b. 1935, Brooklyn, New York] is a painter best known for his photo-realistic depictions of signs, storefront marquees, railroad boxcars, letter forms, and recently, cameras and typewriters. In the 1960s Cottingham began to make paintings inspired by the urban landscape of Southern California. Shortly after, he started to exhibit his work at the Molly Barnes Gallery in Los Angeles, and had his first solo show in New York at O.K. Harris Gallery in 1971. Cottingham's work has been included in seminal group shows including *Documenta 5* in Kassel, Germany (1972); *Contemporary American Realism since 1960* at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia (1981); *American Art Since 1970* at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (1984-1985); and *Hyperréalismes USA 1965-1975* at the Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain, Strasbourg, France (2003). Along with painting, Cottingham has worked extensively in the drawing and print media. A retrospective exhibition of prints by Cottingham traveled from 1986 through 1991 to thirteen national venues including the Nelson-Atkins in Kansas City, Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell University, and the Lyman Allyn Art Museum in New London, Connecticut. In 1993, Cottingham began his ambitious project, *An American Alphabet*, completing in three years twenty-six canvases, as well as corresponding series of watercolors and drawings. In 1998 the National Museum of American Art (now The Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC) presented a retrospective exhibition of Cottingham's work in print media. For the Lab Grant residency, Cottingham debuts new imagery in paper pulp painting – a new medium for the artist. Cottingham is represented by Forum Gallery in New York and Los Angeles.

Founded in 1976, Dieu Donn  Papermill, Inc. is a non-profit artist workspace dedicated to the creation, promotion, and preservation of contemporary art using the hand papermaking process. In support of this mission, Dieu Donn  collaborates with artists and other partners, presents exhibitions, conducts educational programs, and maintains an archive of paper art.

The Dieu Donn  Lab Grant Program, initiated in 2000, provides mid-career artists with a twelve-day residency to collaborate in hand papermaking at Dieu Donn  Papermill. Through this program, Dieu Donn  intends to produce exciting new work with artists who have a mature vision and long-standing commitment to artistic practice, thereby raising the profile of hand papermaking as an artmaking process and breaking new ground in the field. Past participants in the program include Melvin Edwards, Jane Hammond, Jim Hodges, and Dorothea Rockburne.

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